

# Introduction

*Roald Dijkstra, Sanne van Poppel and Daniëlle Slootjes*

Unity is at the basis of any succesful state or nation. Without unity, states cannot survive. Once a small city in Latium, the city of Rome showed a remarkable growth, both in its city's territory, as well as in the Empire it acquired. The ability of the Empire's elite to unite the various peoples under its rule led to an exceptional longevity of empire. The Empire's unity was characterised by the creation of a set of shared customs, languages, history and (religious) beliefs, even though the Romans accepted that their inhabitants maintained their own identity accompanied with their own customs as well.<sup>1</sup> As soon as Rome expanded its territory, the bestowal of Roman citizenship on those who were conquered represented the core of what it meant to be a Roman. Former enemies were incorporated succesfully in the empire, either in provinces or client states. The Social War of the early first century BC which broke out because the allies of the Romans demanded Roman citizenship so that they could have a share in the privileges of the Romans, is a clear indication of its worth in the Late Republic. One might argue that the Empire's unity was a succesful construct that was based on unifying many different peoples and their traditions by offering them a Roman way of life as a additional layer on top of their own way of life.

The focus in this volume is on the unity of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity, with a particular concentration on the fourth century, when the internal cohesion of the empire faced serious challenges. The period was an age of transition: new residencies of imperial power emerged in both West and East, with Constantinople as upcoming principal court and stage for imperial triumphs and celebrations. The political division in two parts after the death of Theodosius I, in 395, seems to have marked the end of administrative unity, although Grig and Kelly, among others, have recently argued that the empire's split has bene emphasised too much in modern scholarship.<sup>2</sup> The attitude of the emperors towards Christianity changed from proscription to prescription, though religious belief and practice – Christian as well as traditional – remained di-

- 
- 1 For the purposes of this volume we deliberately want to stay away from the many and difficult scholarly debates about 'Romanization', acculturation or even creolization.
  - 2 L. Grig & G. Kelly (eds.), *Two Romes. Rome and Constantinople in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2011), p. 17. Instead, they argue that the empire's unity was kept intact to a much larger extent than we think.

verse. Rome's growing status as *the* Christian city culminated in its claim for primacy over other sees in the early 380s.

The concepts of *concordia* and *discordia* pervade late-antique textual and visual as well as material sources. Romans developed and exploited these notions with fairly different (geo-)political, religious, geographical and social ambitions in mind: some strove for unity within the empire, others pursued unity within Christianity. There were advocates for unity among 'real' Romans opposed to threatening 'barbarians' and agents for (a cultural) unity within the senatorial aristocracy. And there were those who rejected these initiatives for uniformity and opted for separation: the split of the empire in 395 was final, but it was certainly not the first division. Besides occasional geographical separate entities, the Latin speaking West and the Greek oriented East had been polarized in intellectual and theological matters. In all cases, people used the concepts of unity and discord in constructing their identity. As a result, the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity was – maybe more than other periods in its history – characterised by its many identities and different groups trying to control the empire.

Our conference *An End to Unity: East and West in the Fourth Century*, held in Nijmegen, 24–26th, October 2012, sought to explore the degree and complexities of unity and discord from a broad historical perspective, aiming to connect assessments of political institutions, religious developments, cultural practices and social interaction. The proceedings offer extended discussions on the ideological messages of unification and the ideal of unity and a universal Empire. The papers are arranged thematically and divided into two parts.

### The Concept of Unity and Geopolitical Developments

The first group of papers, focusing on the geo-political developments in the fourth century, starts off with an exposé by Hervé Inglebert. His contribution is chosen as a key paper to this entire volume, since it addresses a broad range of issues concerning unity in the Later Roman Empire on a conceptual level and showed its potential to incite discussion at the conference. Inglebert emphasizes the different angles from which the concept of unity can be approached. He distinguishes the *unicité* (indivisibility), *unité* (unity) and *unification* of the empire. It was inconceivable for Romans to think of a divided empire, especially in the fourth century, as Inglebert argues. Therefore, even though at that time the empire was actually divided into several regions and the army was commanded by several commanders, it was considered to be undivided. This strong belief in the unity of the empire was not only a chimaera of Romans

who could not bear the reality of an empire seriously threatened from both the inside and outside. It also existed in reality in institutions that continued to exist in the entire empire (e.g. jurisdiction, commerce and shared values). Moreover, in several respects the actual unity within the empire increased during the fourth century. Examples include the prominent position taken by the Latin language in the East, the disappearance of local mint and local law and the expansion of the imperial administration. Amidst these contradictory developments of further integration and (seeming) desintegration, the widespread traditional idea of an undivided empire was easily upheld. Hearts and minds were similar in the West and in the East to a significant degree (unification).

While the importance of the church in the politics of the empire augmented, it adopted the same line of thought: only one undivided church existed. Both orthodox and other-minded Christians sought therefore to impose their point of view on the church of a whole instead of trying to start a competing new church (which as a matter of fact many non-orthodox Christians did).

It is this tension between the ideology of undivisibility and the reality of partial disintegration of an empire with only one emperor, one capital and one state that lies at the heart of recurrent discussions about the degree of unity in the later Roman empire. This notion also explains the different opinions on unity that have been brought forward in modern research. Obviously, there is a real danger of judging the late antique empire with hindsight of its definite disintegration in the fifth century. However, for people living within the empire, whose homelands had been part of the empire for centuries, things could well have been different. For many of them, it seems that the disappearance of the empire was inconceivable. And in many respects, continuity was strongly felt.

The formation and consequences of unity are explored in a paper by David Potter. The power and potential of empires is often measured by the size of the army and the tax revenues that are available to sustain it. Potter shows that the ancients were well aware of these criteria. They also realised, especially in the imperial period, that enlarging the empire would exceed its capacities, given that dividing the empire was not an option. The empire was therefore not expanded, because it would not have been able to reach out farther in a stable way. In addition, internal strife is an important indicator of the strength of any empire: the lack of internal unity on a political level explains for a considerable part the weakening of the Roman Empire in the fourth century.

Giusto Traina's geographical focus on the unity of the empire in late antiquity fits Inglebert's exposé closely: he points to the concern for *concordia* among the tetrarchs, but also to the idea of indivisibility. Yet, at the same time, the imperial administration seems to stimulate division on a practical level. By

contrast, unification is growing in the fourth century due to the rise of pilgrimage, which brought Christians from the West to the farthest corners of the empire (Palestine) to see the holy places of Christianity, and people from the East to Rome, where so many martyrs were buried.

Josef Rist explores the relationship between political and ecclesiastical unity in the years following the death of Constantine. The council of Serdica in 343 is the main focus of his paper. Whereas generally two parties, geographically separated between East and West, are discerned, Rist shows that reality was more complex. Most bishops present at the meeting from the West spoke Greek and the theological stand they adopted was basically the same as that of a Greek theologian, Marcellus of Ancyra. Nevertheless, the council ended in a debacle. The unity of the church was broken, due to a dispute on one of the most important aspects of Christian dogma, the nature of God. The indivisibility of the church was of course maintained on a theoretical level, but differences between the East and West were undeniable. The emerging position of Rome as leading bishopric of the church, which bishops in the West were inclined to accept and stimulate, whereas in the East the matter was viewed differently, added to the feeling that developments in the middle of the fourth century drove away from both unity and unification.

Jan Willem Drijvers puts the *divisio regni* of 364 into perspective by showing how it was foreshadowed by other events from the third century onwards. Political and administrative unity was not to be considered absolute, as Inglebert also points out. Nevertheless, inhabitants of the empire most probably felt unity rather than division, also after Valentinian chose the western part of the empire and granted the eastern part to his brother. Valentinian's soldiers demanded a second ruler. This is a remarkable proof of the complete acceptance of several rulers in one empire in the fourth century. The poem of Ausonius, comparing the three-headed government to the Trinity being one, is another telling example. Both examples proof the sense of *unicité* or indivisibility and unification that pervaded late antique ideas about the empire.

### Unity in The Fourth Century: Four Case-studies

The geo-political reality at the imperial court and in ecclesiastical hierarchy had of course consequences for all layers of the Roman population. The second part of the volume examines both the reality and perception of these consequences by way of four case-studies.

In discussions on the unity of the Roman Empire Constantinople has a prominent role. The ambitions and intentions of its founder and subsequent

rulers are heavily debated. The city at the Bosphorus can therefore not be absent from the present book. Gitte Lønstrup dal Santo investigates the Christian symbols of Roman unity *par excellence*: the apostles Peter and Paul. She demonstrates how the apostles played an important part in the new Rome. The church in the Triconch, dedicated to Peter and Paul, was a cultural symbol of the unity in the empire. A sense of Romanness was transported to a new city, that was to become the capital of the Byzantine Empire for another 1000 years. Without the political unity promoted and realised by the Theodosian house, it would have been difficult and rather inappropriate to transport the cult of the *concordia apostolorum* to the city of Constantinople.

Whereas sports have an enormous impact in the modern world of today, its role in the construction of unity in the Roman empire seems to have been restricted, appearing from the contribution by Sofie Remijnsen. Although games in the later empire became more universal and Greek characteristics gave way to Roman practices, this rather seems to have been a matter of two coinciding developments than the result of a romanization proces. This casus illustrates the formal unity that still consisted and sometimes even expanded – as Inglebert pointed out already – without any political or other intentional policy being involved.

A peculiar aspect of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity is the outstanding role of eunuchs. The influential role of Eutropius at the Eastern court was heavily criticised by the Western court poet Claudian. Shaun Tougher investigates the implications of the poet's orientalist invectives against the eunuch. Claudian, himself stemming from Egypt, wrote for the court of Stilicho in Milan and emphasised differences with the court of Arcadius in Constantinople. He acknowledges the existence of two empires, but this should not be, since he explicitly seeks the unity of one united empire under the rule of his master Stilicho. Claudian's attacks on Eutropius are tendentious, since he presents the eunuch as a symbol of the deprevated East, while eunuchs served both the Western and Eastern courts in the fourth century. It was thus a shared common culture (unification), which Claudian sought to obscure, in order to create the unity he aspired to.

For Prudentius, Rome as the unchallenged cultural capital of the empire and also the core of Romanness was central to his poetry, as is shown by Christian Gnllka. Prudentius suggests that the emperor Theodosius succeeded in converting almost the entire city of Rome by a speech (*Contra Symmachum* 1.506–631). In this way, the poet betrays his longing for one Christian Roman empire on earth. He was not satisfied to wait for the heavenly kingdom, but proclaimed an ever-lasting empire in the here and now, ruled by the emperor he admired: Theodosius I. The need for *concordia* – hinted at by Inglebert

already – was also felt by the Christian poet, who considered it a necessity from a theological point of view. Surely, Prudentius knew that his ideals were not met in the way he described them, but by writing down his *Idealbild* of society, he testifies for the unification of the empire, which remained, all actual problems notwithstanding.

Notably, all contributors turn out to follow Inglebert's focus on the unity of the empire, rather than its division. Underneath a seemingly constantly disintegrating political and administrative level – similar developments occurring from the end of the third century onwards already – the sense of indivisibility and cultural unity was stronger. A analysis of many different aspects of the Roman Empire in the fourth century – as is offered in this volume – emphasises that the break in 395 was most probably not of large influence in the perception of most inhabitants of the empire. They were used to political division and administrative separation, and felt foremost a sense of romanness that resulted in a stronger sense of unity than any government could guarantee.

It is the ambition of both contributors and editors of this volume to have contributed to the debate concerning empire and identity in the fourth century, a relevant and fascinating though puzzling period of Roman history. At the same time, current debates about the need for unity – both within Europe and between Europe and the East – seem ubiquitous, and thus research into the unity of the Roman Empire in the fourth century might even inspire and nourish more actual discussions about the topic.